

Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 8

February 2018

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Recommended Citation

Walker, Taija (2018) "Grabbing Back: An Analysis of Womanism and Cinematic Representation in *These Hands*," *Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons/vol5/iss1/8>

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November 16, 2017

Grabbing Back: An Analysis of Womanism and Cinematic Representation in *These Hands*

Flora M'mbugu-Schelling's 1992 documentary *These Hands* is a 45-minute film depicting the crushing and processing of rocks by women working at a site in Tanzania. Unlike a typical documentary, there are no interviews conducted nor narrator to provide context for the viewer, so the film is heavily reliant on visuals and diegetic sound in conveying information and themes to the audience. Although *These Hands*, lacking in plot and narration, seems like a simple film with little substance, it is clear that there is an underlying agenda and an extremely powerful message, both being womanist in nature, that M'mbugu-Schelling reveals through the film's focus and the cinematic techniques she has employed in its creation.

"Womanism," first coined by Alice Walker, is a term that encapsulates many goals and ideas for those who identify with the ideology, a primary component of which is to critique and fight back against not only the oppression of women in patriarchal societies, but the additional historical exclusion of women of color in feminism, largely including and focusing on Black women. This exclusion has led to a silencing of Black women in Western cinema throughout its history (among many other things), which has motivated directors to use their platforms to reveal the significance of women's roles in African society and to allow these women to truly represent themselves for the first time. As Melissa Thackway states in her book *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film*, womanist directors "are confronted with the double gender and racial misrepresentation of African women in the Western images of the continent" (Thackway 150). Mainstream feminism and patriarchal influences on cinema have, both in the past and present, produced a reductive and very minimalistic portrayal

of African women in Western film (if or when they are shown at all), so these womanist directors have reclaimed the medium through their own portrayals and focus on these women, granting them proper representation and simultaneously deflecting traditional Western depictions of them. These filmmakers are thus able to combat misrepresentations of both natures through film, and M'mbugu-Schelling is one of the directors that has done exactly this with her documentary.

The film opens with a close-up of a woman's face, and then cuts to a close-up of rocks. Close-ups and zooms are used frequently throughout the film and are highly significant. These types of shots tend to be very personal and revealing of true emotion, and the various close-ups of the women's faces within the documentary reveal the struggles they face in the harsh conditions at their worksite. Additionally, their expressions being used as tools to convey meaning allows them to authentically represent themselves and their collective situation. This ability is an essential part of womanism, and Melissa Thackway states that "Western media reports and documentaries often portray African women as the passive victims of poverty and patriarchal oppression . . . [denying] them any active, participatory role in their own destinies" (50). M'mbugu-Schelling, like other womanist directors, seeks not to portray women and femininity as submissive or inferior, but to highlight experiences and the roles they play within the oppressive structures through which a given society operates, as well as to denounce these harmful structures. Although we do see in the film that the women and their work are being exploited, the lack of plot and the choice of songs they sing, coupled with the direct gaze of several of the women into the camera while dancing and doing other activities, allow these women to take up this participatory role and take control of what they want us to see and know. Without dialogue, they manage to successfully display to the viewer the intricacies of their lives

as real women that exist beyond what little we know of them and furthermore, beyond the screen.

The use of diegetic sound throughout the film reminds the viewer that this is reality for the women at the worksite, and not just a story. The sounds of the rocks being hit, tossed, and moved in various ways become quite overwhelming at some points during the film, and reflect the relentless and exploited work that the women must do as a survival tactic, enduring much hardship and receiving very little benefit in return. It also gives the audience an idea of what the women must be going through and how they must feel, in that these are the same sounds they hear every day, and the sounds (as well as the actions accompanying them) seem to be never-ending, only stopping when they take a short break to eat or to sing and dance.

There are many medium-long shots, often accompanying a pan to the left or right, in which we see multiple women situated together. These women, of various sizes and ages, all work together and do multiple tasks to prepare the rocks and to take care of others at the site. We see scenes of them hammering away at rocks, preparing and eating food, quarrying and sifting rocks, sharing water with each other, and singing and dancing. These shots emphasize the arduous and multiple roles of the women at their worksite and their position as the primary laborers and caretakers, which are also reflective of the way that womanism seeks to highlight the roles and position of African women in society. Further evidence for this lies in the fact that the women are working for a company that focuses on urban building projects (displaying another aspect of their multifaceted contribution to society through jobs), that their roles as mothers do not stop while they work, and finally, that we can see gender-based and economic inequality through multiple shots of the men using power tools and machinery, while many of the women are left to use broken or makeshift tools to break the rocks. Furthermore, each of

these scenes conjures a sense of (comm)unity among the women, and the strength they have to endure, despite the physical and emotional pain they may feel on the job. The pain, as seen in the film, comes about through the accidental hitting of hands with tools, as well as the subtle reenactment or dramatization (seemingly unusual for a documentary of this nature) of a woman dying as the result of an on-site accident.

As for the title of the film, *These Hands* also includes many of close-ups of hands, specifically those of the women hammering the rocks. This title is very fitting, as it is again symbolic of the role and position of women in society. The physical pain they feel is through their hands, and the physical labor they do must all be done with the hands, which represents their strength and perseverance. They also use their hands to make food and to clap, emphasizing once again their essential role at the site, as well as their power and ability to make ways to survive through hardship. The film ends with a single woman shoveling rocks onto a pile, situated among many of the other piles at the site, and this scene additionally signifies the continued endurance and persistence of women to work in the hope of a better future. Clearly, M'mbugu-Schelling's message to the audience, in its womanist nature, is one portraying women's power and determination, despite how severe their circumstances may be, as well as criticism of the systems that continue to oppress and misrepresent them, countering the simplistic and nescient Western portrayals of African women that we are, sadly, all-too familiar with.

These Hands, though seemingly simplistic in style, is a womanist film highlighting the strengths of the African women processing rocks at their Tanzanian worksite, despite their multiple struggles. Through specific and clever cinematic techniques, Flora M'mbugu-Schelling is able to convey her message, which is reflective of the wider and vital role and position of women in African society, which are often both overlooked and misrepresented by Western and

traditionally patriarchal cinema. In a way, the women use their hands to not only smash and break rocks, but to survive and break away from misrepresentation, all while correctly depicting oppressive and exploitative practices that may also one day be smashed and broken down, surely by none other than African women themselves.

Works Cited

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